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The limits of espionage

PRESIDENT REAGAN HAS BEEN TRYING for 10 months to convince Congress to go along with his sweeping and dangerous new guidelines for the operation of the Central Intelligence Agency. Each presidential proposal has met with swift, fierce opposition. Of particular concern is the president's determination to widen the very narrow range of CIA domestic activity.

The criticism of the president's proposals has not been confined to liberals in Congress. Several Republicans, including Delaware's Sen. William V. Roth Jr., have argued that the strict limits on domestic activity by the agency stemming from a 1978 executive order issued by President Carter should be retained. And, on the first page of this section, Adm. Stansfield Turner, a former director of the CIA, makes a most persuasive case for keeping the agency out of any but the most limited domestic involvement.

Mr. Reagan's memory is short indeed. The government has been down the road of domestic meddling by the CIA before. Its clumsy operations did much to undermine confidence in the government. The appalling meddling in civil rights and anti-war groups by the CIA and the FBI in the 1960s and early 1970s shocked the nation when it was uncovered by a special Senate committee. The president, himself, as a member of the Rockefeller committee a few years ago, endorsed the concept of denying the CIA a domestic role.

As offensive as spying is to many, the nation can't be without an espionage operation. But it must be controlled closely and reviewed constantly. Mr. Reagan's new guidelines would take the nation several steps backward in this regard. A principle that flows through the president's new guidelines is that of permitting the agency to make its own moral and legal decisions about covert operations. This is implicit in Mr. Reagan's intention to eliminate the current requirement that the president receive full recommendations, including dissents, on all planned covert action; in his plan to eliminate a watchdog board's power independently to initiate investigations of intelligence abuses; and in his proposal to qualify the existing requirement that intelligence officials report suspected criminal violations by their employees to the Justice Department. CIA officials say "Trust us." We have before and found the trust undeserved.

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